

Phoenix hits taxpayers again with park fees

Phoenix once again is burdening its citizens and taxpayers by boosting fees rather than fix the city's unsustainable fiscal structure – this time by slapping charges as high as \$5 a day on people who use city mountain parks. Councilman Sal DiCiccio opposes the fee and enforcing any fine.

“It’s outrageous that the city is dumping more of its fiscal problems on taxpayers rather than taking responsibility and making difficult decisions,” DiCiccio said. “The middle class is getting slammed.”

He pointed to about \$100 million in tax and fee hikes the city already has imposed in the past nine months, including water rates, sewer rates, business permit fees, application fees, towing charges – plus a new \$50 million food tax that was passed with no more than the legal minimum 24 notice to the public.

All this, DiCiccio said, is because the city has refused to address its exorbitant labor costs, which amount to an average \$100,000 for each of its 14,000-plus employees.

The Parks and Recreation Board, which has authority to raise fees without City Council approval, voted last week to charge for parking at mountain preserve lots. The mountain preserve parking fee also came with virtually no notice to the public before it passed, DiCiccio said. It will not be enforced – meaning no one has to pay any fine -- until the City Council authorizes that, which might not be for months, until after an “education” period. Meanwhile, DiCiccio will be working to eliminate the fee.

What will be on Wednesday’s agenda is a city manager recommended tax rate shift that would move nearly \$19 million from the secondary tax rate, which repays voter-approved bonds for specific projects, to the primary tax rate, which pays the city’s operating costs, including salaries and benefits. The Council meets at 1 p.m. Wednesday, July 7, at Council Chambers.

DiCiccio noted that the city manager just last month was pushing the City Council to allow for the secondary tax rate to rise because the bond repayment fund was in crisis and the city was in danger of losing its rating status. The same fund the city said was in danger of insolvency would be made more at risk with this shift, increasing the threat of higher taxes in the future.

The proposal to spend more taxpayer dollars on running the city and less on repaying debt comes right on the heels of pronouncements by city officials that Phoenix was coming out of the economic downturn and hitting its numbers.

DiCiccio’s four-point plan to get Phoenix back on track include:

- Tying government employee compensation to what private sector workers earn;
- Linking and limiting the growth of government to population growth;
- Creating competition for city services so private businesses can compete and taxpayers get the best deal; and
- Aligning city elections with traditional election cycles, making them more convenient for voters and reducing the influence of special interests in narrowly attended city elections.